

Normalcy

EM

“You know why we’re here Will,” you stammer. “Rob. Do you know why you’re here?”

Rob raises his head. “If I do, I don’t like where this is headed.”

“You don’t like where this is headed?” you say. “You!” you say. “I get a call on the phone today from Will’s principal, informing me that my son was caught in the bathroom ‘having an encounter’ with another male student, and you don’t like where this headed?”

You let the point ring out. Will stares at the kitchen island, grinding his thumb into the palm of his hands, counterclockwise, once, twice, clockwise, once, twice, gathering himself, exhaling quivering breaths. Mom’s eyes shut hard. Rob’s lungs won’t contract. Will shifts his feet.

“And what does that have to do with me?” Rob finally asks.

“You’re—!” you begin, loudly, incensed.

“Gay!” Mom finishes, glowering. She speaks measured, evenly and tempered. “What does that have to do with him?”

You shake your head. “Your son comes out this year, and now my son is gay?”

“Our sons are gay.”

We knew what you’d say, how you’d react. But at the same time we needed your acceptance, hoped it would come. Hoped and hoped.

The ceiling fan lazily spins above us, and shadow-casting light spills from its cups. You rest your hands on the sink turn to stare out the window absently, at obscured stars hiding like so many half-moons behind the thick, thatched tendrils of the window screen.

Mom leans heavy against the stove. It creaks. Her hair is hastily tied back and she is still wearing one swaying silver teardrop earring. She must weigh double what she shows tonight. Will leans against the phone stand on the far wall, head-hung. He’s just as tall as it. Always has been small. Rob sits on a step-stool, pallid, fur-

thet removed. He hasn't shaved today. Unbroken for minutes, the silence laps at our toes, stands our hair up. You pull your gaze from the window and look at each of us in turn. We sit like the four ends of a cross.

"Just what are you suggesting?" Mom says. She doesn't have your control; each word rises in pitch and intensity. Her final syllable rings throughout the entire house. Her eyes red.

"Isn't it obvious?" you say.

"No," she says, almost as a dare.

All you have is your anger, passed down to the other men in your family like your green eyes and cleft chin. You have your father, tearing out dresser drawers when you didn't fold your clothing right, throwing your dinner against the wall when you stuttered during grace. You have your silent mother, the sadness in her stone eyes.

"Your son fucked up my son!" you say to her, and turn to Rob. He stands, ready to defend himself. Will's small frame has shrunk even further. Mom clenches her wrist in her hand, digging her long red nails into the flesh as if burrowing to the bone. She has her regret. She speaks softly.

"You're a bastard."

You stop, reeling. You turn to her, and just look. Your wife. Quietly crying, flecks of cracked nail polish pepper her arm— or is it blood? You look at Will for the first time. Disconnected, he stares at the tile beneath him as if it will all fall away if he stops, grinding his thumb into his palm, once, twice, counterclockwise. Rob doesn't back down.

Our dysfunctions bared, the silence creeps back in like an absent shadow. It's oppressive. The air is thick and our words are lost. Our bones and muscle sink into themselves under the slow weight of the soul-compacting atmosphere. Your family, pieces of a fallen window pane.

"Look. I just want to fix this," you say. "I want to fix you, Will. Help me understand."

Will doesn't look up. Rob frowns. "You don't just fix it," he says.

"Look, Rob, I want to help him! There must be some sort

of therapy,” you say.

Rob slams his fist against the refrigerator. “Help me, James! At least pretend that I’m your son sometimes!” You regard him with widened eyes. “Help both your sons.” Will runs the back of his hand across his eyes and wipes his wet skin on his shirt. Mom grips the oven’s handle. Rob looks directly into your eyes.

You mumble something angrily about the dust on the pots. Mom stares at you. But you turn, you kneel as we stay still, you open the cabinet under the sink and pull out a can, slosh it around, and spray the silver handle of a saucepan. Clanging pots are the sound of normalcy, of activity, industry, the telltale dun of everything wrong but working toward right. You know that the alternative is arms-crossed, gazes-down, is stifled, cloying silence, is pleading for a solution when we are so insoluble, is having to say the words, “I can’t.”

You run a spare rag around the contours of the saucepan’s handle and admire your distorted face in the clean surface. You move it with a clank. You shuffle out a pot with a metallic thud and repeat, spritz, wipe, clang. We wince, though thankfully, because it shatters the silence. Our jaws can separate, our skin can slacken, our hearts can beat.

There’s sound, glorious patter and clanks, breath. There’s distraction. We can exhale, and you can fix something. It is small but meaningful.

For a fleeting moment we can forget to speak or think, and concentrate on our own insolution. You have your clanging pots, and we have our quiet certainty that our family can’t yet implode like a dying star. We may have already destroyed ourselves, but for now at least, we have our clanging pots and what we call our normalcy and what we call our happiness.